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ABSTRACT

The Strategies for Effective Learning (SEL) Unit at the Alberta Vocational Centre focuses on developing and teaching cognitive strategies for adults rather than simply diagnosing them. In its initial stages the SEL unit has begun the task of assessing the value of various strategies, testing instruments, and procedures for learning disabled adults. Its intention is to provide information for postsecondary institutions on adult learning disabilities and strategies to address them effectively. When students are initially referred to the SEL unit, they undergo an intake and assessment screening procedure. After a review of test results, an individualized educational prescription (IEP) is generated for each SEL student. The two emphases of the IEP are student self-concept and effective learning strategies. Since commencement of the unit's operation, the staff has provided information on identification of learning disabilities, use of learning disabilities strategies in conventional classrooms, and the needs and fears of learning disabled adults. (YLB)

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STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE ADULT LEARNING:

A Research Based Program for Identification and Treatment of Learning Disabilities

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Introduction

The Alberta Vocational Centre, Edmonton (AVC) is an adult education institution providing a range of educational services. The institution is designed to meet local, regional and provincial needs, focusing on the training of adults who are educationally, culturally, or economically disadvantaged. The goal of all programs is to enhance graduates' abilities to participate in the social and economic development of Alberta and Canada.

As a provincially administered institution (i.e., not a public college), AVC's organizational structure and internal decision making are somewhat different from those in other public educational institutions. These differences and the specific mandate to address the needs of the disadvantaged distinguish AVC from its sister institutions in the college and technology sectors.

Programs at AVC include Academic Upgrading (including English as a Second Language), and a variety of Vocational Programs:

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Business Careers, Health Careers, and Industrial Careers (Building Service Worker, Mixology, Food Preparation, Offset Printing). As well, the institution has large Continuing Education Division, and provides a variety of support services through the Student Services Division.

The Strategies for Effective Learning (SEL) Unit

The Strategies for Effective Learning Unit was originally called the Learning Disabilities Unit. However, because too many students reacted negatively to that title the name change was made. The new name also emphasizes more clearly that the focus of the unit is on developing and teaching cognitive strategies for adults rather than simply diagnosing them.

The SEL unit is in the first of a multi-year research and development cycle. While the program is experimental it is expected to address three objectives:

1. To research and develop efficient, cost effective and reliable tools and procedures for the identification of learning disabled adults.

2. To develop strategies and materials to help the identified learning disabled adults improve their ability to independently cope with their handicap, while attending AVC, at home, on the job, or at another educational institution.

3. To document the characteristics and coping skills of identified learning disabled adults, the strategies employed, and the results of the study.

At this point (April, 1987) a total of 34 students are registered in the SEL unit. Students entering and leaving the SEL unit may encounter a variety of institutional and community resources as shown in figure 1 below.

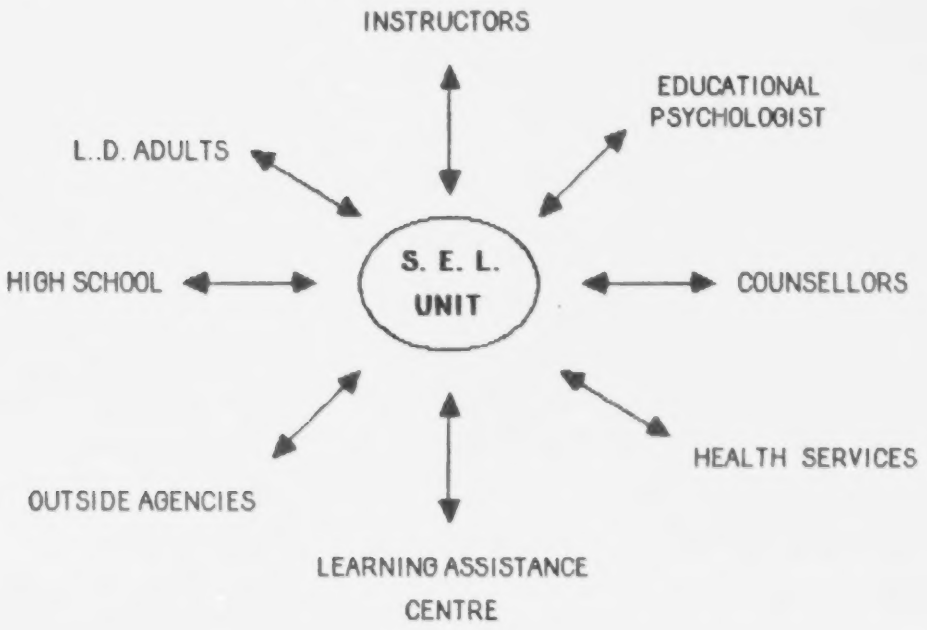

FIGURE 1: STUDENT FLOW TO AND FROM S.E.L. UNIT

Intake and Assessment Screening Procedure

When students are initially referred to the SEL unit they are first interviewed. The purpose of this initial contact is to determine the need for special alternative strategies from the

student's point of view. After the student is interviewed SEL staff contact the referring agent or individual for their assessment. With this information in hand, the student's file containing testing and other data is reviewed by SEL staff, and a decision is made either to accept the student into SEL or to make a referral elsewhere.

Students who are registered in the SEL unit after the screening process are first assessed with the Weschler Adult Intelligence Scale (Revised) WAIS-R. (Because SEL is a research-based development project, one of its objectives is to assess the utility of various diagnostic and testing instruments. A decision will be made on the most cost-effective and efficient form of screening after enough data has been gathered and reviewed.) In addition to the WAIS-R, students may be asked to complete the Woodcock-Johnson, the PPVT test, the Raven's Progressive Matrices, and various informal spelling, writing, reading, and math diagnostic tests. Results of all these tests are reviewed by an educational psychologist, a diagnostician, and a member of the SEL instructional staff.

The SEL Program

After review of test results an individualized educational prescription (IEP) is generated for each SEL student. The IEP is developed in consultation with the student by the educational psychologist or the SEL instructor. The focus of the IEP is two-fold: both student self-concept and effective learning strategies

are emphasized. Self-concept is addressed through information about learning disabilities in general, and a discussion about the individual students' specific difficulties and problems experienced previously. The point of this inquiry and information is to reassure the student that a learning disability is not a form of mental retardation, and that compensating strategies can be learned. Any other questions or problems the student may have at this point are dealt with, particularly as they may effect his or her motivation to continue in the SEL unit.

Generalizeable strategies for learning are another focus of the IEP. Specific attention is given to study skills, social skills, organization of time and other resources, academic trouble spots, development of a variety of learning methods, and career and personal goals. Instruction in these areas is provided in small groups (1 - 5 students), composed of students with similar IEPs. Evaluation is continuous and involves mutual assessment by the instructor and student regarding progress, content, pacing, media, etc. (A student who elects to drop out of the SEL unit usually does so without prejudice: he or she may return when conditions are more favorable, upon consultation with SEL staff.)

Normally a student attends at the SEL unit 2 - 3 times per week, but some students are permitted to drop into the unit based on their own personal schedules and motivations. Some of the materials in the SEL unit are available for self-study, thus

making accessibility to SEL services for drop-in students much greater.

Activity Levels

Staff presently consists of one Project Manager (who is also a half-time instructor), and one and one-half other instructors. In addition to a project secretary there will be a one-half time counsellor in the second year of the project. Also available to the unit are the services of one educational psychologist, two diagnosticians, AVC program counsellors and various outside agencies. The unit originally intended to enroll no more than 30 students at one time, but as reported earlier numbers have risen to 34. (One of the research goals is to identify the optimum number of students, and scheduling methods which would allow the greatest efficiency of staff and resources.)

In addition to running the SEL unit, staff have attempted to provide information to regular program instructional staff regarding learning disabilities and services available to students suspected of this problem. Since commencing the unit's operations in September, 1986, a variety of informational pamphlets have been produced, and sessions held with instructors on these topics. Information has been provided on identification of learning disabilities, use of learning disabilities strategies in conventional classrooms, the needs and fears of learning disabled

adults, and various materials which might be effective in the hands of the classroom teacher.

Conclusion

In its initial stages the SEL unit has begun the complex task of assessing the value of various strategies, testing instruments, and procedures for learning disabled adults. The intention of the research-based program is to provide information for post-secondary institutions on adult learning disabilities, and strategies which might effectively address them. The intention is also to produce written documentation for the use of other jurisdictions. At the present time an interim report has been produced and is available from the authors. In future, two other reports will be produced, one in June, 1987, and another, the final summative report, in June, 1988.